Phenomenology of Anxiety
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Phenomenology of Anxiety
to Marc Richir, who suggested to me that I write this book, and
to Carlo Ginzburg, who, without knowing,
made it possible to finish it.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1 The Anthropological Relevance of Anxiety

In his monographic study *La peur en Occident*, Jean Delumeau reports an interesting judicial case argued in 1586: a person refuses to pay the whole rent for his apartment because it is haunted by ghosts (Delumeau 1978). One might ironically say that such a forced cohabitation justifies a compensation. Pierre Le Loyer, the adviser of the presidential court in Angers at the time, decided to settle the dispute. I cite Le Loyer’s passage because this sentence vividly shows the ambiguous nature of fear (and anxiety): “If the fear (*peur*) is not unfounded and the tenant has had occasion to be afraid, only in this case will he be exempted from paying the rent requested, and not otherwise, when the cause of the fear has not been found to be right and legitimate.”¹ (Pierre Le Loyer 1608, p. 658) The twisted syntax of this sentence signals a fundamental problem: when is fear (“*peur*”) justified? When is it “right” and “legitimate”? And when, on the contrary, does fear cease to function as an effective and reasonable signal preventing imminent threats? In Freud’s terms: how to define the boundaries between anxiety-development (*Angstentwicklung*) and anxiety-preparedness (*Angstbereitschaft*) (Freud 1920/1998)? When does fear become an invasive projection of our own ghosts? And to what extent are our fears in turn introjections of other’s ghosts?²

¹The author is responsible for all the translations where there is no indication of a reference to English books in the bibliographic apparatus: “Que si la peur n’auroit esté vaine & que le locataire auroit eu quelque occasion de craindre, en cas le locataire demeurera quitte des louâges & non autrement si la cause de la crainte ne se trouvoit juste & legitime” (Pierre Le Loyer 1608, p. 658).
²A court case of our times has some interesting similarities to the lawsuit discussed by Pierre Le Loyer. This case was debated in New York in 1991. It is known as the Ghostbusters Ruling: This is “a case in the New York Supreme Court, Appellate Division, that held that a house, which the owner had previously advertised to the public as haunted by ghosts, legally was haunted for the purpose of an action for rescission brought by a subsequent purchaser of the house.” Stambovsky v. Ackley, 169 A.D.2d 254 (N.Y. App. Div. 1991) Since the house was advertised to the public as haunted, its reputation and therefore also its economic value was greatly affected.
These questions have an evident political relevance. Our responses or reactions to fear—and the difference between these is anything but marginal if we consider how these terms (response and reaction) mark the boundaries between the “human” and the dominion of what is said to be “the” animal—have consequences whose scope very often escapes us. Even those preventive measures that seem to be neutral profoundly influence our image of the world. If we adopt defensive attitudes, fear and anxiety tend to increase. Surveillance systems make us feel safe. Nevertheless, they reinforce the conviction that the world is a dangerous place, as Altheide points out (Altheide 2002). It is therefore not surprising that the perception of fear has become central to debates in national and international politics: a sense of security even more than security itself becomes the site of political conflict.

How to start an investigation of anxiety in a rigorous way? Is it even possible to “rigorously” address an overdetermined, chaotic, and acute affect such as anxiety? The way that seems to be less inadequate to me is to introduce a regulative differentiation between fear, anxiety and terror.

In the contemporary philosophical debate, great attention has certainly been devoted to the analysis of the connection between fear and anxiety. In various theoretical frameworks, the definition of the relation between fear and anxiety serves as a criterion for establishing the difference between human beings and animal(s). It is therefore not inappropriate to make a brief survey of the \textit{status quaestionis} in this regard.

Allow me, first, a brief preliminary remark: establishing differences between humans and animal(s) is as difficult to avoid as it is impossible to achieve. This situation is, to a large extent, due to the concept of animality. The notion of “the” animal is inadequate in itself since it is a residual concept, as Derrida shows in \textit{L’animal que donc je suis} (The Animal Therefore I am, Derrida 2006/2008). All animal species are violently “collected” and crammed together in the name of a privation: they are qualified by the common features of \textit{not} having language, of \textit{not} having reason, of \textit{not} being able to feel anxiety etc., ultimately of not being human. The \textit{raison d’être} of the notion of “the” animal lies in its exclusion from the \textit{unique} character of human beings (and it is indeed a secondary problem where the uniqueness of that character should and can be located). The main difficulty of the question concerning “animality” consists in reconciling two opposed tendencies: while one should do justice to the undeniable continuity between human beings and other individual living organisms which are classified according to specific orders and criteria (the “species”), it is also essential not to overlook all those differences between “us,

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1 Sociological studies show that several contemporary political measures do not address social and economic problems, but rather aim at sedating and “calming” the fear coming from those problems (Furedi 2002). The term “culture of fear” has established itself as a distinctive research direction of sociological studies to describe relevant features of our contemporary time (Bauman 2006; Linke and Smith 2009). This research direction also is interested in investigating the various ways in which political power exploits fear, amplifying it and disseminating it through the media: “(…) Fear is socially constructed, packaged and presented through the mass media by politicians and decision makers to protect us by offering more control over our lives and culture.” (Altheide 2017, p. x)
human beings” and those who are excluded from “our” human community. The complex (re-)definition of these relations in terms of exclusion and inclusion is an unstable, ongoing process. It is constantly renegotiated in different eras and cultures, with incalculable political, juridical and economic consequences. The definition of these relations always entails theological, philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions. As already mentioned, the definition of the relation between anxiety and fear plays a relevant role in philosophical inquiries into the human condition. In this respect, it is possible to locate two antagonistic tendencies in contemporary thought:

1. On the one hand, an important tradition regards the experience of anxiety as exclusively proper to human beings. If we consider authors “branded” with the imprecise category of existentialism—such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Tillich, or Sartre—, anxiety marks the exceptional place of humanity in the universe. If one follows the dominant view in the philosophical literature on anxiety, Kierkegaard is the author who first introduces a rigorous distinction between fear and anxiety. The essential characteristic of anxiety resides in its lack of reference to any object: anxiety is anxiety of no-thing. Kierkegaard emphasizes the essential role of anxiety in the ambiguous process of self-identification. The objectlessness of anxiety means initially a latent, dreamlike anticipation of the spirit (Kierkegaard 1980). Anxiety shows that the human being is from the onset out of balance in dealing with their own opposed tendencies between finite and infinite, between possibility and necessity. Human beings can find peace only once they have established a healthy relation with the alien power (God) on which the self-relation is grounded. In Heidegger’s view, anxiety is the fundamental mood that opens the only possible dimension of authenticity conceded to human being. Here anxiety is linked to the experience of nothing and being toward death (Sein zum Tode). In Sartre’s view, anxiety reveals our ungrounded and absolute freedom (Sartre 1943/1984). While fear regards the relation to threats coming from the (outside) world, anxiety primarily concerns our relation to ourselves in a threatening situation: how will I react to the danger? Anxiety presupposes imagination of a future situation and has a (self-)”reflective” nature. We may be afraid of poverty, but we feel anxiety about how we will deal with a condition of privation: in anxiety our freedom is at stake. “In this sense fear

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4 This point becomes tragically visible in Robert Antelme’s book which bears the title L’espèce humaine (1957).

5 Some brief remarks on the metaphysical presupposition can be found in Chapter 4, Sect. 4. The research on “the” animal cannot be separated from the question about sacrifice: the living animal excluded from the human community is expendable and dispensable. In my opinion, an analysis of the “animality” should proceed by unifying different lines of research: (1) It is imperative to critically assess the results of the different empirical sciences (from ethology to cognitive sciences). (2) It is necessary to reconstruct the relationship of the single organism with the surrounding environment by finding the ways in which it co-constitutes its Umwelt. In this perspective, the circle between Merkwelt and Wirkwelt investigated by von Uexküll (1934/2010) remains a point of reference of considerable value. (3) It is important to carry out a genealogical and deconstructive research of the terms used (such as ‘organism’, ‘individual’, ‘animal’), by highlighting their inconsistencies, difficulties and shifts.
and anxiety are exclusive of one another since fear is unreflective apprehension of the transcendent and anxiety is reflective apprehension of the self; the one emerges from the destruction of the other. The normal process in the case which I have just cited is a constant transition from the one to the other.⁶ (Sartre 1984, p. 66, trans. modified). We are afraid of a specific danger and we are anxious about not knowing how we will relate to what we are afraid of. It is not by chance that one can also get distressed and anxious without being afraid—such as, for instance, when one believes that one is not entitled to receive an honorific title or a special award. Yet, despite all relevant differences, the above-mentioned positions share a common ground: anxiety has an anthropopoietic function. Anxiety is a phenomenon which marks the irreducible difference between human beings and “the” animal(s).⁷

2. On the other hand, there is a minor tradition which goes in exactly the opposite direction: not anxiety, but rather fear essentially characterizes human beings. Goldstein and Blumenberg may be considered the most prominent representatives of this view. Here, anxiety is seen as a mismatch between organism and environment. It is a shock deriving from the impossibility of reacting to external challenges in a coherent way. Anxiety arises when adequate responses to the surrounding environment become impossible (Goldstein 1934, p. 254).

Goldstein introduces a distinction between fear and anxiety as follows: whereas we have a distinct threatening object in front of us in fear, anxiety destabilizes us from behind.

On the other hand, anxiety attacks us from the rear, so to speak. The only thing we can do is to attempt to flee from it without knowing where to go, because we experience it as coming from no particular place. This flight is sometimes successful, though merely by chance, but it usually fails: anxiety remains with us.⁸ (Goldstein 1995, pp. 230-1)

What does it mean that anxiety attacks us from behind? In order to answer this question and, therefore, to fully understand Goldstein’s account of the relation between anxiety and fear, it is necessary to take into account his seminal distinction between two different dimensions that are strictly intertwined—(a) an experiential “axis” and (b) an ecological “axis”:

⁶ “En ce sens la peur et l’angoisse sont exclusives l’une de l’autre, puisque la peur est appréhension irréfléchie du transcendant et l’angoisse appréhension réflexive du soi, l’une naît de la destruction de l’autre et le processus normal, dans le cas que je viens de citer, est un passage constant de l’une à l’autre.” (Sartre 1943, p. 64) I have introduced a change in all quotes regarding the English translation of Sartre’s work L'être et le néant: in my view, it is more appropriate to translate “angoisse” with “anxiety” rather than with “anguish”.

⁷ Chapter 3 will be devoted to a critical discussion of the concept of anxiety in Sartre, Kierkegaard and Heidegger.

⁸ “Die Angst sitzt uns gewissermassen im Rücken, wir können nur versuchen, ihr zu entfliehen, allerdings ohne zu wissen wohin, weil wir sie von keinem Orte herkommend erleben, sodass uns diese Flucht auch nur zufällig mal gelingt, meist misslingt; die Angst bleibt mit uns verhaftet.” (Goldstein 1934, p. 189)
(a) The *experiential dimension* revolves around the distinction between ordered behavior and catastrophic behavior. Goldstein’s analysis of anxiety is based on his research on patients with brain damage caused by their participation in the First World War. These patients feel the greatest agitation when performing easy tasks that they would have comfortably accomplished before the disturbance arose, such as combining words in a required order. Their “agitation” is not the result or the consequence of a (failed) action, but should rather be conceived of as the medium in which the action itself takes place:

I have pointed out that the behavior of the patient when he solves a task and when he does not solve it, is only very imperfectly characterized by the account of the effect. We can only gain a deeper understanding if we consider the completely different overall behavior in both situations. Once—in the case of failure—we see a strange stiffness in the face, the patient turns red or pale, there is a change in pulse, general restlessness, tremors, an angry or perplexed expression, a rejecting behavior in appearance; the other instance—during the goal oriented performance—an animated, happy expression, calm, serenity, a committedness to the task at hand. One could think that these are precisely the different reactions of the patient to his ability or inability to do so. But that would be an inadequate description. It speaks against this view that these general reactions in no way follow performance or non-performance, but rather occur simultaneously with them. Furthermore, the patients often cannot say why they have become excited, angry, and dismissive.9

(Anonymous 1971, p. 236)

Anxiety is the organism’s fundamental reaction which Goldstein defines as a catastrophic behavior in opposition to an ordered behavior. In the latter case, one is able to accomplish both tasks and challenges occurring in the present situation without any difficulty: ordered behavior expresses itself in calm and control.

The catastrophic reactions, on the other hand, prove themselves to be not only ‘inadequate’ but also disordered, inconstant, inconsistent, and embedded in physical and mental shock. In these situations, the individual feels himself unfree, buffeted, and vacillating. He experiences a shock affecting not only his own person, but the surrounding world as well. He is in that condition that we usually call anxiety. (Goldstein 1995, p. 49, trans. modified).10
Here, no consistent constitution of objects emerges. Anxiety attacks us from the rear because it is not possible to identify its source:

Observation discloses that, in the state of anxiety, the patient is not really conscious of the impossibility of solving the task and of the danger threatening from it. This can be seen by the fact that the patient does not realize the danger of an object that is the extraneous occasion for the appearance of the anxiety—he is not even capable of this. Because of his specific disturbance, he cannot establish a relation with the object, to wit, he cannot grasp it in such a way that he could appreciate its danger. Apprehending an object presupposes ordered functional evaluation of the stimulus. The fact that the catastrophic condition involves the impossibility of ordered reactions precludes a subject “having” an object in the outer world. (Goldstein 1971, pp. 231–232)

Goldstein shares the existentialist perspective in this respect: in anxiety we relate ourselves to no-thing as long as we consider only the experiential dimension (Goldstein 1934, 190; Visker 2004, pp. 66–68).

(b) Goldstein’s view differs from existentialist positions with regard to a crucial point: anxiety does not emerge without any reason. Goldstein vigorously opposes the sort of affected mysticism which is not foreign to some existentialist approaches to this affect. The origin of anxiety depends on specific mismatches between organism and environment. These mismatches elude consciousness (Goldstein 1934, pp. 190–195). Thus, anxiety should also be considered in ecological terms:

The above statement, however, must be amended. It is only true as far as we consider the inner experience. But the organism that is seized by the catastrophic shock is, of course, in the state of coping with a definite, objective reality; the organism is faced with some “object.” The state of anxiety becomes intelligible only if we consider the objective confrontation of the organism with a definite environment. Only then can we comprehend the basic phenomenon of anxiety: the occurrence of disordered stimulus evaluation as it is conditioned through the conflict of the organism with a certain environment not adequate for it. This objectively endangers the organism in the actualization of its nature. Thus, we may talk of “contentless” anxiety only if we regard the experience alone. To be sure, it is usually in this sense that one talks of anxiety. But this is not quite correct and is due to a false emphasis on subjective experience in the characterization of so-called psychic phenomena. (Goldstein 1971, p. 239)

Anxiety is a shock deriving from the impossibility of facing the challenges of the surrounding world (Umwelt) (Goldstein 1934, pp. 186–187). In order to avoid undue one-sidedness, an investigation of anxiety should always consider both these axes: the experiential and the ecological. Goldstein’s position is highly significant from a therapeutic point of view because it invites us to analyze the interaction between the individual and its environment, and more specifically, the conflicts and tensions that remain hidden from subject’s awareness. Furthermore, it has an important consequence for the definition of the human: the primary characteristic of schwankend, er erlebt eine Erschütterung der Welt um sich wie seiner eigenen Person. Er befindet sich in einem Zustand, den wir gewöhnlich als Angst bezeichnen.” (Goldstein 1934, p. 24)

11 It is worth noting that with regard to the relations between organism and the surrounding world Goldstein’s notion of object is equivocal (Micali 2016).
the human does not lie in the agitated, chaotic and invasive feeling of anxiety, but rather in fear—conceived of as an ordered response to an identifiable threat. Following Goldsteins’s view, Blumenberg’s research shows that only human beings are capable of transforming anxiety into fear by means of the combination of complex social interactions and symbolic activities, such as language. Does reason start from anxiety? Is reason a defense mechanism against anxiety? But how should anxiety be thought? Is it the opposite of reason? Is it the suspension of reasoning? According to Blumenberg, the origin of reason should be sought in the human response to an overwhelming anxiety. To understand this genealogy, Blumenberg introduces the notion of “the absolutism of reality.” The absolutism of reality is a limit concept referring to a pre-historical situation, to a “state of nature” where the human being was still not capable of controlling the conditions of his life, and “what is more important, believed that he simply lacked control of them” (Blumenberg 1985, p. 4). The absolutism of reality may be characterized as a situation in which panic prevails. Clearly inspired by Johann Gottfried Herder, Blumenberg attributes fundamental importance to the shift to an upright posture. More specifically, he connects the pervasive feeling of anxiety with the development of bipedalism. He further elaborates this connection via the so-called “Savannah Hypothesis.” The upright position was due to a significant change of the environment. When our ancestors started living in savannah, a consistent upright position became a clear advantage from an evolutionary point of view. This bipedalism also signifies a new relation to the surrounding world. In Blumenberg’s view, a new interconnection between vision and visibility sets in. The main idea is that the upright posture enables a new relation to what is beyond the visible horizon of perception. Through the upright posture, the organism is now capable of widening its field of perception, but it is also more vulnerable, since it is more visible to potential enemies. This situational transformation has an impact on our “capacity for foresight” (“die Fähigkeit zur Prävention”), on our “anticipation of what has not yet taken place” (“der Vorgriff auf das noch nicht eingetreten”), and on “attitude toward what is absent beyond the horizon” (“die Einstellung auf’s Abwesende hinter dem Horizont”): “In all converges on what is accomplished by concepts. Before that, though, the pure state of indefinite anticipation is anxiety. To formulate it paradoxically, it is intentionality of consciousness without object” (Blumenberg 1985, p. 5).

The power of naming plays a major role in avoiding the invasive affect of anxiety: “What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphor and is made accessible, in terms of its significance, by telling stories of what is at stake. Panic and paralysis, as the two extremes of anxiety behavior, are dissolved by the appearance of calculable magnitudes to deal with and

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12A recent remarkable critical discussion of this theory can be found in Domínguez-Rodrigo’s paper: Is the “Savanna Hypothesis” a Dead Concept for Explaining the Emergence of the Earliest Hominins? (Domínguez-Rodrigo’s 2014, pp. 55–69); see also Schrenk’s account in his book “Die Frühzeit des Menschen” (Schrenk 1997, pp. 30–32).

13 “Alles konvergierend auf die Leistung des Begriffs. Dem zuvor aber ist die reine Zuständlichkeit der unbestimmten Prävention die Angst. Sie ist, um paradox zu formulieren, Intentionalität des Bewusstseins ohne Gegenstand.” (Blumenberg 1979, p. 10)
regulated ways of dealing with them (…)" (Blumenberg 1985, p. 5). The almost magical power to name allows us to “shape,” that is, to define anxiety. Naming affords us distance from our affects: in this way, we are also able to determine anxiety. Fear presupposes the establishment of a stable symbolic order, namely the creation of a cosmos. In other words, the affect of fear is a result of cultural achievements. The transition from anxiety to fear occurs “primarily, not through experience and knowledge, but rather through devices like that of the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar, of explanations for the inexplicable, of names for the unnamable” (Blumenberg 1985, p. 5; Pippin 1997, pp. 288–290). Put differently, all fears arise from anxiety—they are, so to speak, “urbanizations” of anxiety.

From Goldstein’s and Blumenberg’s perspective, it does not make sense to ask the question whether animals feel anxiety. Assuming that fear presupposes the establishment of a stable order, related both to symbolic activities and the organism’s detachment from its surrounding world (Umwelt), then it is definitely more appropriate to ask a different question: are animals capable of feeling fear? It is necessary to clarify an aspect of this perspective that easily gives rise to misunderstandings. The conception of fear considered here does not primarily concern the objective identification of a distinct external danger. Such a thesis would indeed be untenable. Ethological research shows that several animal species communicate dangers to members of their group in a very efficient way. And this is particularly evident for species known for their high communication skills such as anthropomorphic monkeys, parrots, dolphins, mongooses, ants and bees. For example, vervet monkeys signal dangers through a sophisticated system: four different calls refer to the presence of four different predators—pythons, baboons, eagles and leopards (Seyfarth et al. 1980). Goldstein and Blumenberg develop a concept of fear that does not primarily concern the problem of communication of information about a given external threat to other members of the groups. It rather relates to subjective processes of (self)-regulation of affect through the mediation of symbolic activities coming from social interaction. Self-regulation implies and enhances a distance, a delayed relation, a temporal gap between the surrounding world’s affordances and one’s own answers. Distancing oneself from destabilizing affects, not immediately reacting to changes in the surrounding circumstances, and developing the use of linguistic symbols through social interactions, are closely intertwined processes.16

14 “Was durch den Namen identifizierbar geworden ist, wird aus seiner Unvertrautheit durch die Metapher herausgehoben, durch das Erzählen von Geschichten erschlossen in dem, was es mit ihm auf sich hat. Panik und Erstarrung als die beiden Extreme des Angstverhaltens lösen sich unter dem Schein kalkulierbarer Umgangsgrößen und geregelter Umgangsformen (…).” (Blumenberg 1979, p. 12)

15 „Das geschieht primär nicht durch Erfahrung und Erkenntnis, sondern durch Kunstbegriffe, wie die Supposition des Vertrauten für das Unvertraute, der Erklärungen für das Unerklärliche, der Benennungen für das Unbenennbare.” (Blumenberg 1985, p. 11)

16 The investigation of the present question would greatly benefit from research on the relation between Goldstein’s approach to fear, the notion of an eccentric position in Plessner’s sense (1928), and the phenomenon of joint attention, that occupies a prominent role within the field of evolutionary anthropology (Tomasello and Farrar 1986; Tomasello and Kruger 1992; Tomasello 1999).
Consistent with his approach, Goldstein holds that children are initially more subject to anxiety than to fear: learning to feel fear is a gradual process; it is, as already said, a cultural achievement. In this regard, a brief observation on the function of fairy tales for our relation to anxiety is helpful. Many fairy tales—for example, Charles Perrault’s Bluebeard or several stories written by Grimm—may be seen as an initiation into evil for children. I have always wondered why parents read such disturbing stories to their children when putting them to bed: why tell a four-year-old boy the story of a serial killer, as in the case of Bluebeard?

According to the psychoanalyst Mentzos, fairy tales primarily perform a pedagogical function with respect to anxiety: “It is to assume that the emergence of terrifying tales and the predilection of children for this kind of stories are associated with the fact that children have here the opportunity both to concretize vague anxieties and to endure them in the presence of an adult”\(^{17}\) (Mentzos 1982, p. 35). An analysis of Propp’s studies on the fairy tale may help both to corroborate and to further develop Mentzos’ thesis. From Propp’s perspective, fairy tales are characterized by a specific structure: they start with the experience of the hero’s separation from their condition, from their “home” (from their “feeling at home”). After having experienced several misadventures and challenges, the hero is able to come to terms with these adversities: the violated order thus is redeemed (Propp 1968). The narration of different forms of negativities (such as abandonment, loss, etc.) exposes the child to an experience of \textit{regulated anxiety}: the interruption of order is functional to the “stabilization” of the world into a meaningful and safe cosmos. Put differently, the narration of different forms of negativity is connected to the transformation (and condensation) of anxiety into fear. This interpretation of fairy tales seems to suggest that it is always better to name, verbalize, or give shape to evil, even in its crudest forms, than to be exposed to the intense night of free-floating anxiety.

Above all, research on great apes (chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans, gorillas) stands out for their relevance (Byrne et al. 2017). Both chimpanzees and gorillas show complex strategic behaviors regarding fear. De Waal reports an interesting case of a chimpanzee covering his own face to prevent an antagonist from seeing his expressions of fear. If the rival was aware of his fear, he would have been in a clearly disadvantageous position: “I observed a remarkable series of signal disguises. After Luit and Nikkie had displayed in each other’s proximity for over 10 minutes a conflict broke out between them in which Luit was supported by Mama and Puist. Nikkie was driven into a tree, but a little later he began to hoot at the leader again while he was still perched in the tree. Luit was sitting at the bottom of the tree with his back to his challenger. When he heard the renewed sounds of provocation, he bared his teeth but immediately put his hand to his mouth and pressed his lips together. I could not believe my eyes and quickly focused my binoculars on him. I saw the nervous grin appear on his face again and once more he used his fingers to press his lips together. The third time Luit finally succeeded in wiping the grin off his face; only then did he turn around. A little later he displayed at Nikkie as if nothing had happened, and with Mama’s help he chased him back into the tree. Nikkie watched his opponents walk away” (De Waal 2007, p. 128). See also: Tanner and Byrne (1993).

\(^{17}\) “Es ist zu vermuten, dass die Entstehung von furchterregenden Märchen und die besondere Vorliebe der Kinder dafür damit zusammenhängt, dass diese hier Gelegenheit haben, diffuse Ängste zu konkretisieren und in Begleitung des Erwachsenen ‘durchzusetzen.’” (Mentzos 1982, p. 35)
Finally, it is important to highlight a presupposition of Blumenberg’s account that I find quite problematic: blind panic is assumed as the core of anxiety. It is not to be excluded that there is a hint of irony in his hyperbolic statement that anxiety is always pathological (Blumenberg 1979/1985). Still, anxiety primarily signifies a suspension of symbolic activities in Blumenberg’s theory. In the present work, I intend to question Blumenberg’s thesis. Anxiety should not primarily be conceived of as blind panic. Rather it signifies a re-orientation of our thinking, of our symbolic activities, of our imagination. Anxiety does not simply “suspend” symbolic activities. Such a suspension represents a limit-case occurring in extreme pathological forms of anxiety. Generally, however, anxiety makes us see ghosts, enlarges dangers, alters our perspective on the world, and amplifies our emotional response to threats. In other words, it entails—to use Merleau-Ponty’s expression (after André Malraux)—a “coherent deformation” of both our symbolic activities and of affective responses.

To summarize the provisional results of the present section: I have taken two different traditions into account in order to define the relation between fear and anxiety. This relation has been sketched in opposing terms. In one case, anxiety is considered an essential characteristic of the human being, whereas, in the other case, this status has been assigned to fear understood as the “urbanization” of anxiety. Still, both traditions share a basic assumption: understanding the relationship between fear and anxiety is essential for understanding the human being.

2 Polyphonic Phenomenology

From the point of view of ordinary language, it is difficult to make a rigorous distinction between anxiety, fear, anguish, worry, pre-occupation, etc. If one attempts to investigate these affects systematically, it is almost unavoidable for the sake of clarity and coherence, to overemphasize their specific features at the cost of other equally relevant aspects. In other words, this systematic attempt inevitably entails a certain degree of arbitrariness which should preferably remain undetected, in order to establish clear and reliable boundaries between those different phenomena. For this reason, it is essential to underscore the fluid nature of affective phenomena from the very beginning. Our concepts certainly influence and shape our affects. But the concepts operate on a fluid surface. They are comparable to those figures that are formed on the surface of water and that gradually become indistinguishable. We can certainly see the circle caused by throwing a stone in a pond. That circle

18 "In spite of its biological function in separation and transition situations where magnitudes of danger are not predefined, anxiety is never realistic. It does not first become pathological as a phenomenon of recent human history; it is pathological." (Blumenberg 1985, p. 6) “Angst ist, trotz ihrer biologischen Funktion für Trennungs- und Übergangszustände unter nicht präformierten Gefahrengrößen, niemals realistisch. Als Spätphänomen des Menschen wird sie nicht erst pathologisch, sie ist es.” (Blumenberg 1979, p. 12)
corresponds to the word “anxiety”—it has a certain physiognomy and specific features, but the sharpness of its outlines easily tends to dissolve into something else. The differences that seem clear and distinct slip away, becoming other than themselves. Therefore, it is important to find a balance, a middle way, between the demand to do justice to affective phenomena in their specificity and the awareness of their evanescence and fluidity: these features are incompatible with any categorical rigidity. It is crucial to mention here the linguistic difficulties that mark, almost obsess, the present work:

1. These difficulties first of all concern ordinary language. I will address and critically discuss authors who not only belong to different philosophical traditions and disciplines, but also deal with the problem of anxiety in different languages at different historical periods. Even the most basic choices of translation represent telling challenges: how to translate the German word Angst into English? The most natural candidate seems to be “anxiety.” Another viable option may be “anguish.” Theoretically it would even be possible to keep the original term “angst.” The decision about translation is all but easy, especially bearing in mind that “Angst” in German is a very common word that has a broad meaning—to the extent that it includes extreme phenomena of real terror (“die nackte Angst”). Instead, the word “angst” in English belongs to a sophisticated speech pattern that almost unequivocally betrays an academic education. The word “anguish” emphasizes the aspect of intense current suffering gravitating towards pain. The term “anxiety” is today immediately associated with the psychotherapeutic context: it is linked to a pathological disorder. These various nuances inevitably have an impact on our understanding of the affective phenomenon. It is indeed important not to overlook the relevance of these asymmetries, shifts and discrepancies between different languages. Sometimes, the translation of a philosophical term generates a heated debate on a specific affect, without it having an equivalent in the original language. To cite a paradigmatic case in this regard: there is no doubt that Heidegger’s analysis of the relations among fear, anxiety and terror has a significant impact on the philosophical, psychiatric and anthropological tradition in different linguistic communities (such as English, French, Spanish and Italian). However, the term “terror” cannot be found in Sein und Zeit: Heidegger uses the expression Entsetzen (Heidegger 1967, p. 142). The importance of these linguistic “shifts” cannot be overestimated.

2. It is clear that the concepts of anxiety and fear receive different meanings depending on the different theoretical frameworks in which they are elaborated. As already noted, according to a dominant view in the philosophical literature, starting from Kierkegaard the absence of an object is seen as the discriminating factor between anxiety and fear. Whereas fear is directed to a concrete and immediate threat clearly identifiable against the actual horizon of experience, anxiety does not refer to any object and arises without any reason. Anxiety relates to the undifferentiated nothing. This approach has been further developed not only by existentialist authors such as Heidegger, Tillich, and Sartre, but has also been taken up by influential scholars belonging to other disciplines, such as
Sigmund Freud. It is not difficult to understand the reason for the success of this differentiation. This “scheme” introduces clear reference points which help us to orientate ourselves in the analysis of a protean affect. And yet this view is problematic in several respects. I limit myself to mentioning two of them:

(a) This approach misunderstands Kierkegaard’s perspective. It is not possible to deepen Kierkegaard’s concept of anxiety here (see Chapter 3, Sects. 1–3), but I cannot avoid a short remark on this subject. It is no exaggeration to argue that the above-mentioned interpretation is a caricature of Kierkegaard’s thought. Anxiety is certainly related to the notion of no-thing, but this nothing changes its meaning according to the context: while anxiety of nothingness shows itself as fate in Paganism, anxiety is opening onto nothing as guilt in Judaism. In the state of innocence, anxiety disturbs the self as an anticipation of spirit. This form of anxiety is very different from the anxiety of sin in Christianity (Kierkegaard 1980; Theunissen 1997; Gron 2008). Anxiety is certainly anxiety of nothing, but the concept of nothing has different meanings in different historical situations. In other words, the ambiguity of anxiety is related to the plurivocity of the notion of nothing (see Chapter 3, Sect. 7).

(b) This “scheme” enjoys such success that one is tempted to “project” the articulation of a relation between anxiety and fear onto traditions of thought that do not know this kind of differentiation. The term *phobos* in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* evidently eludes the distinction between an anxiety open to nothingness and a fear intentionally directed to a particular threat.

Yet, a hermeneutic approach sensitive to the variations of the meaning of these words (fear, anxiety, *phobos*, *angoisse* etc.) faces a distinctive difficulty: it risks an inconsistent use of the terms.

Thus we find ourselves at a crossroads between Scylla and Charybdis—between an incoherent use of these terms and an illegitimate generalization of a current differentiation based on the (lack of) intentional reference. To solve this difficulty, I will refer to the original term in parenthesis after the English translation (such as *phobos*, *metus*, *timor*, *crainte* etc.). Systematic reference to the original term reminds us that it is illegitimate to project our categories onto foreign horizons of experience and thought. While a lack of concordance cannot be avoided, this discrepancy does justice to the specificity of the different conceptual frameworks. This solution is in line with the general structure of the present work, which is irreducibly *polyphonic*. My use of the term “polyphony” alludes to the theory that Bakhtin develops in his analysis of Dostoevsky’s work. Bakhtin’s theory intends to underline the autonomy of different voices that cannot be traced back to a unitary and all-encompassing neutral discourse: “A plurality of independent and unmerged
voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels”\(^{19}\) (Bakhtin 1984, p. 6).

Furthermore, polyphony presupposes a dramatic juxtaposition of positions which do not appear easily compatible (Bakhtin 1984, p. 28). Hence, the juxtaposition does not reach any overall vision that unifies the different parts from above into an ordered and coherent whole, nor does it resolve into a dialectic in which the partial truths of the single phases are redeemed in a synthetic movement of a higher order. The essential categories of polyphony are coexistence and interaction, as opposed to the notion of evolution:

Dostoevsky strives to organize all available meaningful material, all material of reality, in one time-frame, in the form of a dramatic juxtaposition, and he strives to develop it extensively. An artist like Goethe, for example, gravitates organically toward an evolving sequence. He strives to perceive all existing contradictions as various stages of some unified development (...). In contrast to Goethe, Dostoevsky attempted to perceive the very stages themselves in their simultaneity, to juxtapose and counterpose them dramatically, and not stretch them out into an evolving sequence. For him, to get one’s bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment. (Bakhtin 1984, p. 28)

Dramatic juxtaposition tends to make opposing perspectives contemporary, creating a pluralistic world with irreducible tensions between different points of view.\(^{20}\) Therefore, the present work may even be seen as an archipelago of different fragments that reflect the same question from different angles.\(^{21}\) It aspires to do justice to the alterity of our own voice and thinking. It is also important to add that my use

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\(^{19}\) “In no way, then, can a character’s discourse be exhausted by the usual functions of characterization and plot development, nor does it serve as a vehicle for the author’s own ideological position (as with Byron, for instance). The consciousness of a character is given as someone else’s consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author’s consciousness. [...] Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel. He created a fundamentally new novelistic genre.” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 7)

\(^{20}\) “Dostoevsky’s extraordinary artistic capacity for seeing everything in coexistence and interaction [...] sharpened, and to an extreme degree, his perception in the cross-section of a given moment, and permitted him to see many and varied things where others saw one and the same thing. Where others saw a single thought, he was able to find and feel out two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered in it the presence of a second and contradictory quality. Everything that seemed simple became, in his world, complex and multi-structured. In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity, of every phenomenon. But none of these contradictions and bifurcations ever became dialectical, they were never set in motion along a temporal path or in an evolving sequence: they were, rather, spread out in one plane, as standing alongside or opposite one another, as consonant but not merging or as hopelessly contradictory, as an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel.” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 30)

\(^{21}\) This polyphonic approach has strongly influenced my decisions concerning less visible aspects of the present work, such as the use of citations and quotes. I use long citations in order to let the other’s voice be heard. In addition to their evident hermeneutic value, references to the original texts in the footnotes also contribute to the polyphonic aspiration of this manuscript.
of Bakhtin’s polyphonic theory is strongly influenced by different contemporary paradigms such as Levinas’s idea of the primacy of the Other, Bernhard Waldenfels’s responsive phenomenology, Derrida’s deconstructivist approach, and Ginzburg’s morphological research (Micali 2020). At the same time, the present work aims at carrying out a rigorous phenomenological analysis of anxiety in post-Husserlian sense. In Chapter 4, Sects. 1–3, I underline the meaning, the function and relevance of phenomenology in the context of contemporary philosophy with its introduction to new concepts of phenomenon and intuition.

One could see a tension between the two above mentioned moments central to the present research: a polyphonic approach and a phenomenological investigation. How is it possible to do a rigorous phenomenological analysis through (and via) a polyphonic approach? In my view, exactly the opposite is true. Phenomenology taught us that the concept of rigor cannot be the same in different contexts, in different domains. Only a polyphonic approach is able to do justice to a phenomenon as ambiguous as the anxiety in a rigorous way.22

References


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